Malleable marble
The Antwerp snow sculptures of 1772

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Winter had the city of Antwerp firmly in its grip in the first two months of 1772. Between mid-January and mid-February heavy snowfall and severe frost coloured the city white and governed every aspect of life. A group of sculptors and students from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts defied the bitter cold and modelled 24 figures out of the abundant snow clogging Antwerp’s streets. No childish snowmen these; they were monumental statuary groups, created from the artists’ imaginations or inspired by existing compositions. This spontaneous exhibition of snow sculpture was such a spectacular event that odes were written to it, and in 1773 an aristocrat by the name of Count de Robiano even published a book of engravings of all the sculptures, the Collection des dessins des figures colossales & des groupes qui ont été faits de neige (fig. 1). It is a rare record of an equally rare and transient phenomenon that has barely been researched in the history of sculpture.¹ The literature on materials and iconography likewise provides little in the way of insights into or reflections on this singular sculptor’s resource.² And yet a study of De Robiano’s little book makes it plain that the unusual medium of snow, with its often contradictory associations and properties, in part dictated the form and subject matter of the Antwerp snow sculptures of 1772 and the long tradition in which they stand.

In the first place, to quote Didi-Huberman,³ snow is a ‘substance between two states’, a relatively unstable state of water. The crystalline structure of the material is fragile and dependent on temperature; a modest rise is enough to change its coherence and its viscosity and to transform it into liquid. It is part of a natural cycle of evaporation, saturation and precipitation as water, hail, snow or ice, followed — or not — by melting. Snow is fickle and behaves according to its own laws. It is as unstable, transitory and ephemeral as life itself;⁴ in eyewitness accounts snow sculptures often metaphorically come to life, and their melting is associated with movement.⁵ Snow arrives spontaneously and unexpectedly, it is usually soon gone and it is vulnerable. In Western Europe not every season brings snow — not even every winter — and certainly not in large quantities. The elusiveness and unpredictability of the material present sculptors with a challenge. At the same time, snow is democratic: it is free and available to all. What’s more, it does not take much strength to shape it. Its accommodating nature invites one to mould and model it, as children must have done for centuries — although

Detail fig. 20
Unknown artist after Hans Vredeman de Vries, Neptune riding a whale, 1582